Interview with Edward Alexander

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project Information Series

EDWARD ALEXANDER

Interviewed by: Hans Tuch

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Q: Good morning. This is Hans Tuch interviewing Edward Alexander, Ed Alexander, on July 26 at my home in Bethesda, Maryland. Good morning, Ed.

ALEXANDER: Good morning, Tom.

Q: Ed was born in 1920 in New York City, educated at Columbia College where he received his BA degree. He received his graduate MS degree in Journalism from Columbia University.

1950: Entrance Into VOA After PsyWar Film Production Experience

Ed, you got into government work, specifically VOA, in 1950.

ALEXANDER: That's correct.

Q: How did this come about that you came to the VOA?

ALEXANDER: Well, during the War, Tom, I was in psychological warfare. And we were in a very unusual outfit dealing for the first time ever in psychological warfare a technique, a

military technique, that General Eisenhower and General MacArthur frowned upon, they thought it doesn't replace guns. General Eisenhower soon changed his mind when we had whole regiments of Germans defecting to us. In that organization of just 50 people, there were a great many refugees from Eastern Europe and a lot of Jewish refugees from Germany. And I maintained relations with a number of them until after the War.

To jump ahead, I had worked for four years right after the War on two Laurence Olivier films, “Henry V” and “Hamlet”—Lawrence Olivier, who just died a couple of weeks ago. And so I was working for the J. Arthur Rank organization and traveling all over the United States and Canada. And when I came back—I had since married—my wife said, look, enough travel, let's settle down someplace. I was walking on Fifth Avenue one day when I ran into one of my psychological warfare buddies. His name was David Berger. David Berger had a program on WQXR for many years, as a matter of fact, on German music that you may remember.

Q: That's right. Yes.

ALEXANDER: Right. And David said, “Ed, what are you doing?” And I said, “Well, I'm looking for a job.” He said, “My God, this is our lucky day, yours and mine.” He said, “The Voice of America,”—where David was working at the time in the German service—he said, “the Voice of America which has begun, as you know, broadcasts in Russian and Ukrainian, now wants to expand to the Caucasus and to start an Armenian, Azerbaijani, and Georgian, as well as Tatar and Uzbek.” And he said, “I want you to come”—because I'm ethnically Armenian, Tom, as you know, and although my Armenian I have to admit at the time was not up to par, nevertheless I had spoken it as a kid.

Q: Was it your parents who emigrated?

ALEXANDER: My parents had fled the Turkish genocide, that's right. My father later on in years told me—"Up until the year you were 5 years old, you spoke better Armenian than English," which was unusual.

At any rate, so I said, okay, let me go. And I was interviewed by Archie Roosevelt, Jr., now the husband, as you know, of the Protocol Chief. And Archie—and I'm not blowing his cover because he's written a book since then about his experiences—Archie was at the time on loan from the CIA to the State Department, which handled VOA at the time. This was long before USIA. And Archie was a CIA officer who was recruiting.

Q: This was in 1950?

ALEXANDER: This was in 1950, that's right.

Alexander Organizes VOA Foreign Language Broadcast Section for Southwest and South Central USSR

Archie Roosevelt interviewed me and asked if I could organize some of these refugees or emigres now, some of them displaced persons at the time, and interview them and see if they could qualify to work at the Voice of America. Fortunately my father and mother had been very active in refugee relocation so they knew Uzbeks, Tartars, Azerbaijanis, Georgians, and of course Armenians the most. At any rate, I was successful in organizing them and these were the first language services in that geographical area of the Soviet Union, in a VOA branch headed by Gerald Dooher.

We worked at the Fisk Building in New York on 57th Street in one huge room. You can imagine, it was the Tower of Babel, all these various languages. And then of course we had the imposing figure of Alexander Barmine, who used to walk in and look us over. You know what that was like, Tom, you know him very well.

Q: Similar to now with the Russian Empire looking over us.

ALEXANDER: Exactly, exactly. Right. So at any rate, in the beginning, geographically it was very strange. They didn't know in what division to put us. And over the years, as long-time VOA experienced personnel such as yourselves and others will know, we oscillated between East Europe, Southern Europe, USSR, back to East Europe, and now we're in the USSR division.

At any rate, that's how my affiliation with VOA began. And Foy Kohler, of course, was the director of VOA at the time and a marvelous director, we all admired him very much.

Alexander Becomes Chief of Armenian Service

Q: You then became the chief of the Armenian Service.

ALEXANDER: I was then made chief. When finally all these displaced persons were in, I was made the chief of the Armenian Service.

Q: Let me just ask about some of the other: just for the historical record. Foy Kohler was the Director of VOA in New York; VOA was part of the State Department?

ALEXANDER: That's correct.

Q: Who were some of the other—do you remember some of the names of the other people who were involved at VOA at that time? You mentioned Berger.

ALEXANDER: Yes, right.

Q: And Alexander Barmine who was head of the Russian division.

ALEXANDER: Right. Our Policy Advisor was Edwin Kretzmann, marvelous person. Sane, reasonable, a gentleman. Foy Kohler's deputy for operations, I don't know the exact title but I think that's what it was, was Al Puhan, who later on became German desk officer and then eventually, actually I served under him in Hungary—we're jumping ahead now, but

he succeeded Martin Hillenbrand as ambassador in 1969. At that time I spent about two months with Al Puhan there in Budapest. We used to have fun reminiscing about VOA at its early times.

And actually I had known Al in psychological warfare also because in 1944-45 he was in Luxembourg when I was in Verdun. He was in charge of Operation Annie, a “black radio” propaganda station. This goes way back, though, Tom, and has nothing to do with the Agency.

Q: Right. Go on. The Armenian Service.

ALEXANDER: So we had the Armenian Service and we began. It was fascinating. I don't know how much you want to know about that, Tom. It was very interesting the people I was able to recruit, I was very fortunate. I had from Soviet Armenia an engineer, an agronomist, a poet and translator, people who had never seen a microphone in their lives. And then two people from Iran. Armenian has an eastern and a western dialect, as you know, but the eastern dialect is what's spoken in Soviet Armenia, and in only one other country in the world, and that's Iran. So we could get people from Iran although we had to sort of update their vocabularies. I mean, the Russians and Armenians had changed things so much.

But at any rate—and this we did for three years until—

Operating Procedures and Progress of Armenian Service

Q: How much did you broadcast per day?

ALEXANDER: We began with 15 minutes. And not live. It was very interesting. It was on disk. And every time there was a fluff we'd have to start all over again. Well you can imagine how many fluffs were made by people who never saw a microphone. And there were so many funny stories. We would take a level, for instance— anybody who's done

broadcasting knows, you sit, and then your producer says, give me a level. And you start talking and then they get the level so that when you go on the air the volume will be exactly right. Well, I'll never forget the day this one agronomist sat there. We asked him for his level, he gave the level, and then we gave him a signal to go ahead and he pushed the microphone away and started talking, as though it were an impediment. But there were a lot of stories like that.

We broadcast 15 minutes and then expanded to half an hour. That was the most we did, half an hour.

Q: Per day.

ALEXANDER: Per day, that's right. Every day, with one or two repeats at the time. Then there were things like the Courier, which would relay, and so forth. The Courier was a ship —

Q: A Coast Guard cutter.

ALEXANDER: Yes, in Greece, actually Rhodes, the island of Rhodes. It would relay the broadcast and give a stronger signal into the southern areas of the Soviet Union.

Q: In your half-hour broadcast— what did you broadcast? News?

ALEXANDER: Yes. We would begin with headlines. This was an attempt to counteract the jamming, that is to say, because the Soviet jammers would take a minute or longer to get going, we tried to squeeze in some quick news right at the very outset of the program. It must be remembered that this was at the time of two wars—the Korean War and the Cold War, and jamming was at its very zenith.

Q: This was in the early '50s?

ALEXANDER: This was in the very early '50s. This was Stalin's period and, well, there was a lot of name-calling. And VOA then was not at all like it is today. Today it's a gentlemanly broadcast that you hear. But then, it was hasty words like “jackals” and “wolves” and things like that appeared in the text. It was unbelievable.

Q: Very aggressive.

ALEXANDER: Very aggressive, that's right.

Q: Anti-Soviet.

ALEXANDER: That's right. And the only thing that made us change it in any way was when Radio Liberty began broadcasting, well they took over all the name-calling and so we settled down.

Q: That was also in about 1951, wasn't it?

ALEXANDER: Yes. It was maybe '52, around that time, yes. Initially called Radio Liberation at the time.

Q: Liberation, broadcasting, at that time from Munich.

ALEXANDER: That's right. From Munich. Right.

VOA Moves to Washington: 1954

Then it emerged that the State Department was unhappy with the fact that they were in Washington and we were in New York and it created difficulties in policy guidance. So a move began which took an awful long time to transfer the Voice from New York City to Washington, D.C. where State could have more of a handle on it.

And to jump ahead again, we made the move in '54 and I don't think it made any difference whatsoever in policy guidance because it was simply, I mean telephones were just as effective with New York as they were here and so forth. There's a funny story about that. Every morning at the Policy Meeting, Ed Kretzmann used to say, “I've been talking to Washington this morning and Washington says—don't do this or don't do that.” That was under the Truman Administration, when VOA began. The move to Washington was made during the Eisenhower Administration. In any case, once we re-located—a massive job, I might add—in Washington, at our morning policy meetings it seemed incongruous to say, “Washington says, do this” or “do that,” because we were in Washington. So it wasn't until then that the cat was out of the bag and we discovered that “Washington” was really someone named Joe Polakoff and having made the huge move to Washington didn't really change things at all. [laughter]

Q: Now this was in 1954—

ALEXANDER: Four, when we moved, yes.

Q: —and by that time there was USIA.

ALEXANDER: There was USIA, it had already been formed as a separate agency under the Eisenhower Administration.

Q: And VOA was, became part of USIA.

ALEXANDER: Correct.

Q: And Joe Polakoff was the USIA Policy Officer with the liaison with the State Department giving guidance to the Voice of America.

ALEXANDER: To the Voice of America. Exactly right. And then in Washington, of course, we developed—the program went from a half hour to an hour, actually.

Q: And how many people did you have working there?

ALEXANDER: We had twelve.

Q: Twelve, for an hour's program.

ALEXANDER: For an hour's program, yes, right.

Q: It took usually eight for a half hour and then—.

ALEXANDER: That's right. Because you needed back-up stuff, you know. You could use features—commentaries were of course political commentary which meant they had to be topical—but features could be held for later. You could translate something in June and broadcast it in October. Something like the importance of aspirin, if it was a medical feature, or traveling to the moon or similar subjects. So what you needed were extra people to keep translating features, to write features, to have a back-log.

Q: Was this a half hour program in the morning and a half hour program in the evening?

ALEXANDER: No. One solid hour, it became one hour.

Q: In the evening?

ALEXANDER: Yes. It became one hour, heard in Soviet Armenia in the evening, that's right.

Q: Still obviously heavily jammed.

ALEXANDER: At the time, yes. It's only recently, as you know, that the jamming has stopped.

Horrors of the McCarthy Period

Q: Now this was also for VOA a very difficult period because of the McCarthyism which affected VOA very directly—

ALEXANDER: Very, very directly and very severely.

Q: Tell me about that.

ALEXANDER: Although I was never personally involved, Roy Cohen used to come and use my telephone. Perhaps because I was down the hall from the hearing room where McCarthy was having his hearings. And Roy Cohen—my door was always open—used to come and not ask permission, just pick up the phone, dial a number and then say pompously, “This is Roy Cohen.” Then either “Get me Senator Joe” or someone else at the Waldorf Towers. It was a very, very bad period because we had a number of people at the Voice who in their youth in Central Europe, in Eastern Europe, had been members of Social Democratic parties and so forth. Now you and I know, Tom, I mean, for heaven's sake, that's not, these are not Stalinist parties, they're not Trotskyist parties. Some were Christian Socialists, some were Social Democrats and so on. And they were frank in their opinions and freely talked about things. Well, you know the poisonous atmosphere that existed at the time when anything that even obliquely implied Marxism to any degree was anathema, thanks to McCarthy. And so McCarthy picked on them. Well, as I recall, we had two suicides as a result of that. One I distinctly remember was the chief of the Romanian Service. A terrible tragedy. A man's life shattered because of what happened.

And there were disgraceful things going on all over the place. Roy Cohen, an absolutely ruthless person, ruthless. McCarthy, of course ruthless but out to make a name for himself. Roy Cohen also out to make a name for himself, but in the shadow of McCarthy and wielding a hatchet the likes of which you just can't imagine. I remember once writing a memorandum of complaint to our security office. And my four former Soviet colleagues from the Soviet Union—they knew what I was doing, and they came and they pleaded with me not to do it, for my own protection. This was their Stalinist upbringing. They said, you

know, Ed, these things go into files, you're never going to know what's going to happen, and who will read it and so forth. But I said, listen, I'm a native American. If we can't at least do things like this, all is lost. I'm not saying that I was courageous or anything like that. I was just outraged by what was happening. So this thing is in the files someplace.

Q: There were also people feeding Roy Cohen information from within the Voice of America.

ALEXANDER: That's right. Oh, there were traitors. Yes. I mean, that may be a strong word to use, but—. Traitors to VOA, yes, who were undermining the rest of us. They were known as the “loyal underground.” What a misnomer!

Q: Was VOA management in any way supportive to those who were being attacked? Or were they involved in this? Or was USIA management supportive? This was in 1953, '54. Actually before you moved to—.

ALEXANDER: It was before Washington. Yes, this was in New York.

Q: In practical terms, how did this work itself out?

ALEXANDER: Well, this was the Eisenhower administration, you know. President Eisenhower didn't take a strong stand at first but he eventually did take a stand. But it was also the time of Ed Murrow.

Q: At CBS.

ALEXANDER: At CBS, that's right. And it wasn't until Ed Murrow had that famous “See It Now” program of half an hour, which I will never forget, which began to draw the curtain on McCarthy.

However, to return to your question, I would say there was no resistance. I wouldn't say there was collaboration or anything on the part of VOA leadership. Incidentally, this was after Foy Kohler and Kretzmann; this was under a fellow named Johnson.

Q: Johnson was the head of the International—

ALEXANDER: No, not that one. This was Doc something or other, I forget now. He was a short, chubby man who on June 6, when we went in for our big policy meeting—.

Q: June 6, 19—.

ALEXANDER: June '6, whatever it was.

Q: '53.

ALEXANDER: Three, yes. And we sat there and he looked at us for a long time and then said, “Today is D-Day.” And I don't know what we were supposed to do as a result of that, but we all sat there stupefied wondering what he was going to say next. And it turned out he was a correspondent involved in D-Day so he wanted us to know that.

But I mean, we had—we did not have good leadership, Tom, I would say. I do not remember any resistance whatsoever, with the exception of some very courageous people like Howard Maier who was our chief political writer at the time. And Howard Maier stood up to McCarthy and refused to cooperate with him. It was on page one of the New York Times.

Putting Together the Armenian Service News Program: 1954

Q: After you came to Washington in 1954, you had a one-hour Armenian Service program. How was it organized? Your one-hour program?

ALEXANDER: Well, we would have the features ready the day before, the evening before. Because we had to go on the air, because of the huge time gap, Tom, between Washington and the Soviet Union, we had to broadcast early in the morning. So we all came to work at 6:00, 6:30, 7:00, and the broadcast would go on, depending on whether it was Eastern Standard Time or Daylight Savings, 9 or 10:00 in the morning. Which is pretty darn early, you know. A lot of the other services were just slowly coming in with their cups of coffee and so forth and we'd already had our second breakfast. So the features were all ready, sometimes interviews with some prominent people, film director Reuben Momoolion, or writer William Saroyan, prominent Armenian Americans. But in the morning we would have to do the political commentary, of course, which had to be topical, and sometimes the correspondent's reports from the field, and the news. The news—a good 15 to 20 minutes of news. I would have three or four people working on the news exclusively. I would pick the news, taking it from the tickers, and constantly refreshing it.

Q: Oh, you actually wrote your own newscast at the time? There was not a central news and feature organization?

ALEXANDER: No. The news came on the ticker in English of course, we had to translate it. But I could alter the news in many ways.

Q: There was not a central newscast produced by VOA?

ALEXANDER: No, oh, no.

Q: You looked at the tickers, the AP—.

ALEXANDER: I would look at the ticker, that's right. Now usually I would not change the top story because it was usually the major story of the day. But then after that I had a great deal of flexibility in what I could do. And I could change the news anyway I wanted and give it any order that I wanted. And so that would all be ready. And then, you know, theoretically, if you were going to go on the air at 9:00, let's say, we should have been

ready at 8:00 and had a rehearsal of the program. We never had a rehearsal ever. And we were lucky if we got to the studio one minute before studio time, breathless, sitting there, taking a fast level and then, bang, off we would go. We never missed a broadcast.

Q: Then you would have, what, 15 minutes of news?

ALEXANDER: Fifteen minutes, 18 minutes of news, that's right. Beginning with a billboard. We would begin with a billboard, what we were going to have that day. And then headlines, and then the news. And then at the end of the news headlines again. Sometimes if we were a bit short with the news we would interrupt in the middle and give headlines in the middle of the news broadcast. Sometimes at the end of the broadcast if the headlines weren't enough—we had this much flexibility—we would repeat the first news item, in case people tuned in late. Because with the jamming, you know, and the shortwave and so forth, we figured they might miss some parts of the program. It would reach Yerevan, capital of Soviet Armenia, at, it was either 6 or 7:00 at night. So you figured people just coming home, at dinnertime presumably, so they needed a little time to adjust, and then to find also a frequency that was not jammed, or was not jammed as much.

And then we would continue with the political commentary and then at the half hour we would have headlines and then continue with the rest of the broadcast, which could be an interview of 8 to 10 minutes with somebody, or features, medical features, science features, agricultural features, and so on.

Q: I might interject an anecdote there, too. Looking at it from the other end. You know that I was assigned to Moscow in 1958.

ALEXANDER: Right.

Q: And one of my jobs there as, so to speak, press and cultural attach#, I had to monitor the Voice of America, that was one of my principal jobs, which meant in effect monitoring

the jamming, and identifying—trying to identify—the jammers. We traveled. A colleague of mine, Ralph Jones, and I went down to Yerevan. We were the first American diplomats who were permitted to go to Yerevan. The city had already been opened to travelers but not to diplomats and we were the first diplomats. We went to Yerevan and of course it was my job again to try to listen to the Voice of America. I didn't understand Armenian, I only understood Russian, but I merely identified the jammers who were active in Armenia. And Ralph Jones and I decided that we wanted to enjoy ourselves down there and what were we going to do. So we asked the Intourist office in Yerevan, our host, in quotes, that we wanted to go to Echmiadzin to call on Vosgen I, the Catholics, the Pope of the Armenian Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church. They were flabbergasted. No such request had ever been made by diplomats.

Well, we insisted and we took a taxi and drove out to Echmiadzin. I don't know whether they had a chance to warn the people, I think they probably did. We were met by a Palestinian priest who spoke Russian, no English. We conversed with him and we said that we wanted to pay our respects on the Catholicus. And after about a half hour of scurrying around it was arranged. And we were brought to the Catholicus, Vosgen I, who —we didn't know this—was a Romanian by birth, who spoke Russian but it wasn't his native language. He spoke, of course, Armenian, Romanian, and he also spoke German fluently. And we decided, he and we, that German was our best common language. And for the next two hours, because Ralph Jones spoke German and I did, we conversed in German, to the utter discomfort of the Palestinian priest who was there to listen to the conversation and who didn't understand a word of German.

ALEXANDER: Right. And presumably to report on it.

Q: —and Vosgen kept winking at us, saying this man doesn't understand a word, let's continue. And so we spoke German for two hours. It was fascinating for us and it was a wonderful experience.

ALEXANDER: I know. Isn't he a delightful man?

Q: Oh, he's a delightful man. I mean, he must be in his late '70s by now.

ALEXANDER: No, Tom, he's in his late 80s. And, can I just jump ahead for a second?

Q: Sure.

ALEXANDER: As a result of the 1988 Soviet Armenian earthquake, Vosgen came to the United States in February 1989 and in Washington he was invited to the White House. The State Department called me and asked if I would interpret for him in Armenian. I said I would be delighted to do that. So we met the night before and we chatted. The following day we went and I interpreted for Vosgen for President Bush. And it was a memorable experience. I reveled in it. I figured, in my retirement now, this sort of caps my career.

Q: Very much so. He gave both Ralph and me a little souvenir. To me he gave a little shot glass, silver "ryomok" with the cathedral church engraved in it. And he blessed them. And he blessed us before we left. I still have it, as a souvenir.

We are digressing. Let's get back.

ALEXANDER: It's all right. It's fun.

Q: Yes, that's what I think makes both of our lives interesting, these little anecdotes.

ALEXANDER: That's right.

Q: You stayed with the Voice of America with the Armenian Service until when?

ALEXANDER: Until 1959.

Q: And then what?

Alexander Goes to West Berlin (RIAS): 1959

ALEXANDER: And then the Director of the VOA European Division at the time was Alex Klieforth. And Alex Klieforth was then transferred by George Allen to West Berlin in 1959 to be Director of RIAS, Radio in the American Sector. And Alex before he left said to me, why don't you join me in Berlin. He said, you've got German, you've got the broadcasting experience, and it's time for you to get away from the Armenian Service and to get into the Foreign Service. So I said, okay, fine.

Barry Zorthian, the VOA Program Manager, said, I'm not letting you go until you find a successor.

So that took a long time but it finally worked out, and finally I went to Berlin. In '61 Ed Murrow—the next USIA Director—brought Alex Klieforth back to the Voice of America. And that's when I said, Alex, how can you desert us like this? And he said, When Ed Murrow asks you to do something, you have to do it.

So there I was at RIAS, and you know, Tom, you've been Minister for Public Affairs so you know the whole German set-up and you were also PAO in Berlin. And you know that in those days, not recently but in those days, the United States had a very firm hold on RIAS. We funded most of it, controlled policy, and had at the time seven Americans there. And I was one of the seven Americans. And each one of the Americans had a different part of RIAS to control; outside of the director there was a deputy director then there was administration, then there was political programming and economics, things like that. I had all of the cultural programming. I had the cultural and the music, and it was tremendously enjoyable. We had our own symphony orchestra. Ferenc Fricsey was the conductor. Absolutely great days. And it was only as the years went on, little by little, that it was whittled away. The Germans slowly funded it more and so in consequence there were fewer Americans.

The Alexander Organized Festival of Music at RIAS

But while I was there, being in charge of the music, I was I must say dismayed at how little American music was played at RIAS. And so I went to the Music Department, called a meeting, and I pointed this out and they just looked at each other and said, we're a German station. As a matter of fact, once on the Fourth of July I asked them why they didn't acknowledge the occasion and they said, because RIAS has nothing to do with the United States. Well, this was very dismaying, you know. So I decided to do something on my own. I got in touch with people at State in the Cultural Department. Joe Roland—you remember Joe Roland? Guy Corriden and people like that. With their support I arranged a festival of American music in Berlin and invited Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Gunther Schuller, Elliot Carter, Roger Sessions, and Henry Cowell. And—yes, it was really the top. They all came. Not all together. Separately so that they would come, record music, lecture at the Amerika Haus, give public concerts and so forth. And it was really, as far as I was concerned it was the high point of my time at RIAS and I was very proud of it. And Berlin never heard so much American music as at that time. And it was really great, and those recordings live on.

Q: After RIAS, you changed, so to speak, careers.

1965-1969: Changes of Career From Radio to USIA Foreign Service—Budapest

ALEXANDER: Yes, I did.

Q: You joined the Foreign Service.

ALEXANDER: That's right.

Q: And your most interesting and significant assignment was your first Foreign Service assignment, namely as Press and Cultural Attach# in Budapest.

ALEXANDER: That's correct.

Q: When did this happen?

ALEXANDER: That was in 1965. I was assigned in '64; I was brought back, studied Hungarian at the Foreign Service Institute for a year and then in '65, in September, we arrived in Budapest.

Q: With your Armenian background and your background in other languages, was one year enough for Hungarian?

ALEXANDER: One year was enough, Tom, yes, interestingly enough, and Alex Klieforth, our mutual friend, said how did you ever get an S-3 at the FSI in Hungarian? That's a dreadful, dreadful language. I said, it is, but I enjoyed it.

You know, Tom, there's a theory. I read a lot about linguistics at the time because I didn't know how I was going to grapple with this difficult language, which at FSI they say is even more difficult than Russian. But what the linguists say is that if you have grown up in a foreign tongue, certain brain patterns have taken place which make it easier for you to learn another language. And so although Hungarian was difficult in the beginning, because I knew Armenian, it worked out and I was able to get a 3, which was very good. And then of course when you're in the country, and I was there for four years, it always improves because you have the grammatical foundation.

Q: I happened to be in Washington in the Soviet area office at the time when you first went to Hungary. You replaced Clem Scerback?

ALEXANDER: No, I replaced Leon Shelnut.

Three Major Problems with Hungarian Government During Alexander's Tour in Budapest

ALEXANDER: Scerback replaced me.

Q: You spent four years in Budapest during probably one of the most difficult times for us with the Hungarian regime.

ALEXANDER: It was indeed.

Q: We had a very tenuous relationship. Did we still have an ambassador there?

ALEXANDER: No, we had a charg#, who was Elim O'Shaughnessy.

Q: And the reason, tell us about why we didn't have an ambassador there.

ALEXANDER: Well, first of all, in Europe only two countries were left where we did not have embassies. One was Hungary and the other was where you served as DCM, Tom, in Bulgaria. These were the only two legations. When I arrived in 1965 our top diplomat there was the charg# d'affaire, Elim O'Shaughnessy, and in September of 1966, Elim O'Shaughnessy passed away. He passed away on an unusual day. We had had a PAO conference in Vienna and for the first time, the first time a USIA Director was going to come to Hungary. Leonard Marks had been to the conference and he and Dick Davies, one of your successors—your immediate successor, I guess, at USIA in charge of East Europe—and I drove back from Vienna together, only to learn the tragic news from my wife when we arrived. When I called from the hotel and said we're here, she said, “My God, you can't imagine what's happened. Elim O'Shaughnessy died this morning.” Can you believe that? Dick Davies, ever aware, you know, of rank and so forth, said, “Ed, the DCM is on leave, so you're the top guy, you're the charg#, you call the shots, whatever you say goes.” But you can imagine my state of mind, as you said, first real post, you know, and so forth.

At any rate, Elim passed away and we went through a very difficult period. We had a DCM, who was Dick Tims, and it wasn't until the following year that the legation, both

legations were raised to embassy status. And the first ambassador to Hungary was Martin Hillenbrand, who had been the DCM in Bonn. And this was his first ambassadorial post.

A. Hungarian Demands for Return of Hungarian Royal Crown

You mentioned difficulties before. We had three major difficulties with the Hungarian government. The most remote one was the Hungarian crown which we had taken in 1945 and was at the time at Fort Knox. This was the Crown of St. Stephen and the Hungarians wanted us to return the crown. We were under pressure to withhold the crown from many groups here, Hungarian-American groups, and took the position that the crown would never be returned until there was a drastic change of policy in Hungary. The more extremists said, not until Communism is out of Hungary. Well, we knew that wouldn't be for a long time.

B. Violent Protests Over U.S. Role in Vietnam War

That was one problem. The second problem was the Vietnam War. This was the era now of Lyndon Johnson and terrible, terrible riots in front of the legation and Johnson burned in effigy, and so forth, and constantly thrown in our faces. Szabadsaqter—Freedom Square, where the embassy is, jammed with thousands and thousands of people. A terrifying thing. And rocks thrown at us. One rock just grazed my head; just a half inch more and I would have looked differently, if still alive. As a matter of fact, there was a protest the next day by the embassy that the rioters almost killed our press and cultural attach#.

C. Cardinal Mindszenty's Safe Haven in U.S. Legation-Embassy

So that was the second problem. The third problem was the presence in the embassy-legation of Joseph Cardinal Mindszenty, who in October 1956 during the Hungarian uprising had taken refuge in the Parliament and then when the Soviet tanks returned on November 4, rushed across and was brought by his aides to the legation. So from 1956 to the time I got there in '65, nine years, he had taken refuge there. He had been living

in the quarters of whoever would have been the ambassador, which was a large room overlooking Szabadsaqter, although he always kept his blinds closed. And a little bedroom and a bathroom.

Q: Not an easy guest.

ALEXANDER: A very difficult guest sometimes because— well, there were a few of us who had studied Hungarian, of course, who could converse with him in Hungarian. And this was good. We used to take him on his walk. We took turns. See, at the time there were no marines, Tom, so it were embassy officers who stood guard at night, as you did in Sofia. In Budapest, we took turns sleeping at the legation and bringing him his food from the cafeteria. We had a little cafeteria manned by—how do you man by a woman? Is it womaned? I don't know.

Q: Managed by a woman.

ALEXANDER: Managed by a woman, okay, and she would prepare food—she of course was one of the few people who knew who this food was for. Although there were no secrets from the Hungarian secret service. I mean, when we would go for the walk in the courtyard every night, there was an interface of the legation building with an apartment house and we knew that they were watching us from there. We used to have fascinating talks, the Cardinal and I about all kinds of things—for instance, papal infallibility and Kadar and the future of communism.

Q: The Cardinal didn't speak any other language?

ALEXANDER: Yes, he did; yes, he did. We spoke Hungarian for—I'm glad you raised that —we spoke Hungarian for a couple of years, and then one day he said to me, by the way, he very seldom used names. He addressed me as titkar ur, which means Mr. Secretary. Mr. Secretary, he said, I have the impression you speak German. And I said, of course, I was in Berlin five years and before that, during the war I was in Germany. And he said,

you know, I would like not to lose my German, so why don't we talk German sometimes. So I said, fine, it's all right with me. And so then we would speak either Hungarian or German. And it was very good for both of us.

Sometimes a difficult person, Tom—to return to what you asked me—sometimes not at all. A man who loved children. When we would go to Vienna to see people or to buy some things that they didn't have in our small commissary, he would ask me or my wife always to buy Hershey bars, which he would then distribute to the children of the legation. He was kindly that way. He loved children.

Q: He was actually still there when you left?

ALEXANDER: Yes. In the four years that I was there— because he didn't leave until '71, 15 years. However, when Martin Hillenbrand came, when Martin Hillenbrand came in '67—as ambassador, President Nixon had already written to the Cardinal suggesting gently that it might be time to go and had raised the legation to embassy status. And this was 180 degrees opposed to what the Cardinal had wanted, because it reflected a warming up of relations between the United States and Hungary.

Q: First of all, raising our status to embassy.

ALEXANDER: To embassy, and then sending an ambassador. So he began to clear out his desk, and the apartment. He got rid of everything except his memoirs, which he had always been working on. He had a remaining relative, an elderly sister, who came for the last time, and then he was ready to go. In the meantime, I should say that we had a number of visits by church officials—Cardinal Casaroli came from Rome to convince him to leave, and Cardinal Koenig of Vienna came more frequently. One night he came and it was too late to go so I had to make beds for Cardinal Koenig and Cardinal Mindszenty and it was an unforgettable evening, I must say, truly unforgettable.

At any rate, Cardinal Mindszenty could not be deterred from going. And Martin Hillenbrand, as you may remember, was a devout Catholic and his mother, who had come with him, was a devout Catholic. Cardinal Mindszenty was so incensed—this is something nobody knows, Tom—he was so incensed at the whole situation, embassy and ambassador, that he refused to invite Ambassador Hillenbrand to his Sunday morning service. He held a service every Sunday morning, Catholic service, mass, and we went frequently although we are not Catholics, we are Armenian Apostolic, nevertheless we would go. It was a morale builder for the Cardinal and my wife is closer to the church than I have been. So we did. We would go with our sons, also. At the time—the eldest of our three sons, Mark, was already in school in Vienna, but we had two little sons whom we had always wanted to baptize in the Armenian Church. We had been planning to go to Venice to San Lazzaro where there's an Armenian monastery to have them baptized there.

Well, I said to the Cardinal one day, Your Eminence, would you be willing to baptize my two sons? And he said, you are Armenian Apostolic—he knew more about the Armenian Church than I did. He had the whole history down, and he knew Cardinal Aqajanian very well, who was then one of the senior members of the College of Cardinals. And he said, let me think about it. Vatican II had already taken place so he called me in and he said, under the Ecumenical Council and the new rules, yes I can do that. I want your sons to memorize a few things and so forth. Cardinal Mindszenty then baptized our two sons.

I did this partially because it was an honor and it was historic as far as I was concerned, and partially because I wanted to keep him there as long as possible. Incidentally, I asked him if I could have Ambassador Hillenbrand and Mrs. Hillenbrand, Faith Hillenbrand, as Godfather and Godmother. He said, “No.”

Well, I could see that Ambassador Hillenbrand, who is a genuine Gentleman, he's a marvelous person, I could see that this was wearing on him. And of course it was an untenable situation. You can't have this world famous figure in the embassy there and the American ambassador not having any relations with each other. It's absurd. In addition to

which the ambassador had to periodically send reports into the State Department on the condition and state of mind of his famous guest.

So I went to Martin Hillenbrand and I said, Marty, this is a very unhappy situation, I would like to suggest something to you. As you know, I have close relations with the Cardinal and most recently they are even closer because he baptized our two children. And I regret deeply that—I had asked if you would be the godfather and Faith the godmother and he had said no, but despite all that, would you have any objection if I went to the Cardinal and said, please relent, and let's not have this situation continue? And Martin said very simply, it's all right, Ed, please do. And I went and I convinced the Cardinal. From that time on the Ambassador and his family were welcomed at the Sunday services and it went on very, very well.

Q: Tell me, under those circumstances that you outlined about our relationship with Budapest at the time, Hungary at the time, the Vietnam war, Cardinal Mindszenty, and—

ALEXANDER: The crown.

Q: The crown. What kind of a public diplomacy, cultural informational program, could we, the U.S. government, carry out in Budapest at that time?

ALEXANDER: Extremely limited, Tom. We had a space in the embassy which was supposed to be a library that was simply books piled up collecting dust. The agency had sent hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of books, but nothing had ever been done with it and the place was an absolute mess. And I vowed that before I left Hungary I would open that library. Well, I discussed this with Hungarian officials and they said no, absolutely not, it's out of the question, outside of which hardly any Hungarians came into the embassy except for visa purposes.

Isaac Stern Shows Up Unexpectedly in Budapest

Well, little by little I chipped away at it. You asked what could be done. Hardly anything could be done except once in a while something happened that was either at my initiative, our initiative, or sometimes Hungarian initiative. For instance, for years the Hungarians apparently had approached Isaac Stern to come and give a recital, come and play with an orchestra or just a solo recital. And Isaac apparently never could find the time to do that. One Sunday night at 10:30 at night, we had retired, and the phone rang and the voice says, “hello, is this Ed Alexander?”

I said, “yes.”

He said, “this is Isaac Stern.”

I said, “Isaac Stern, where are you calling from?”

He says, “I'm downtown. Honey, (his wife) what's the name of this place? Oh, the Gellert Hotel.” He said, “listen, you like salami?”

I said, “yeah, I love salami.”

He said, “why don't you come down and have a Hungarian salami sandwich with me and let's talk.”

I said, “Isaac, what the hell are you doing here?” I had never met him before, you know, but it was just such an informal thing. Well, at any rate, to cut it short, I went down and we had three of the most delightful days. Isaac said he was in between engagements. He said, the Hungarians had been after him for years and he finally decided to do this thing. And he said, I gave them a real cut price on it. It was great. I was on very close terms at the time with Zoltan Kodaly who was the foremost living Hungarian composer, so I called Kodaly, I told him Stern was here. He said, wonderful, let's try to arrange a concert together. And we did. And it was great. That was something that just happened, you see.

U.S. Actor Kirk Douglas Visits Budapest

Then early in '66 a cable came from State saying that Kirk Douglas wanted to visit several countries in Eastern Europe. He also came to Bulgaria, Tom?

Q: Yes.

ALEXANDER: At any rate—and they said that he had certain requirements. He wanted to learn a local song. I knew he was going to go to Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Bulgaria. He was going to touch base all around. I remember Phil Arnold who was press officer in Warsaw called me and he said, have you seen what this guy wants? And I said yes. He wanted—I didn't finish what he wanted. He wanted a local song to learn, when he arrived; he wanted to address a large number of students; and he wanted to meet the head of the country, the chief of state. Well three difficult things. The song, okay, but how good is he in all these languages. At any rate, Phil Arnold said, who the hell does this guy think he is? Well, what can we do? We have a message already that he's already seen the president—which was Lyndon Johnson, with Jack Valenti, a close friend of his, and etc., etc.

At any rate. He came and we spent three days together. Talk about difficult people, boy, he's a real difficult person. Edgy, prickly. But cooperative, too.

By Happy Accident, Kirk Douglas Meets Janos Kadar

At any rate, the first night he's there, Elim O'Shaughnessy said to me, “this guy is never going to meet Janos Kadar, head of the party.”

I said, “I know he's not.”

He said, “what shall we do with him?”

I said, “well, let's have a little reception at your house and then let's take him to the Matyas Pince.” He said, “Why there?”

I said, “Well, it's a good Hungarian restaurant. And, you know, once in a blue moon, Kadar goes there for dinner.”

He said, “Well, he's not going there tonight.”

I said, “I know, I know, but let's go there anyway.”

So we walk in and the head waiter comes over to me and says, “Don't I know this person?”

I said, “Yes, you've probably seen 'Spartacus,'” —because that was the one film shown all over East Europe. I said, “That's Kirk Douglas.”

He said, “Oh, that's wonderful, that's great.”

And Sandor Lakotos, who was the great Hungarian violinist whose records you probably have heard, he saw me and he struck up an American tune. So we sat there. Then when the waiter came to order, he leaned over and whispered to me, he said, “I'll bring the best things we have.”

I said, “yeah, this has got to be real special.” I asked, “By the way, when was Kadar here last?”

He said, “Why do you ask?”

I said, “Well, this guy, if I could introduce him it would be great, but I know he's not—.”

He said, “He's sitting over on the side,” he said, “in a booth with his wife.”

I said, “You're kidding.” I turned to O'Shaughnessy. I said, “can you believe it, he's here.”

He said, “All right, my boy, it's up to you.”

So I got up. I said to the waiter, How do you address the head of the party? I can't call him Comrade, I'm not Communist” He said, just call him Mr. Kadar. So I went over to his booth. The Secret Police were all over the place, the minute I walked over they all stood up and the music stopped and all eyes turned on this confrontation. I stood there. Kadar was looking into a bowl of soup, maybe it was goulash, I don't know. And he looks up at me—he was a very somber person. So I said to him, of course in Hungarian, “Mr. Kadar, my name is Alexander. I am with the American legation here and I would just like one minute of your time. I have here a famous guest, he's a Hollywood star—. I don't know if you've heard of him.”

“What's his name,” Kadar asked.

I said, “his name is Kirk Douglas.”

He said, “Kirk Douglas?”

I said, “do you know the film 'Spartacus'?”

He said, “Yes, I've seen that film.”

I said, “He was the star of 'Spartacus.'”

Mrs. Kadar was sitting there amused. But now Kadar too was amused. An American diplomat is talking Hungarian to him! And so he said, “bring him over.” So I went back and said, “Kirk, it's all yours. Let's go over there.”

He said, “You did it?”

I said, “Yeah.” So we went over there. They shook hands. I interpreted for them, and it was great.

We came back, Kirk looked at me and said, “You can do no wrong from here on in, no wrong. That's great.” That's the only chief of state he met. Not really chief of state, you understand.

Q: That got me into deep trouble.

ALEXANDER: I know, I know. I believe it.

Q: I could not produce Todor Zhivkov in Sofia.

ALEXANDER: I know. I know. All over East Europe, everybody was complaining. What the hell did Alexander do to us!

At any rate, I said, “Kirk, you want to learn a song?” He said, “To hell with a song, forget about it.”

I said—this is the next day—I said, “now students, this is very tricky.” I said, “You know, Kirk, this is a very difficult time in our relations.”

He said, “Is it really bad?”

I said, “Very bad. However, there is something I'm going to try to do on the spur of the moment. Would you like to address a group of the most prominent Hungarian directors, movie stars, theater people, and so forth?”

“That's a great idea,” he said, “let's do that.”

I arranged it and it was a success because I knew a lot of these people already. You know, in our jobs we have to know these people. And it was arranged, at the Hungarian Actors Club, 60 people came.

And on the way driving there he said, “Ed, I want to quote from Lenin.”

I said, “You want to quote from Lenin? To these guys?” I said, “They don't like Russians.”

He said sharply, “I didn't ask you if they liked Russians”— this was the prickly Kirk Douglas —”just give me a quote.”

So I said, “Okay.”

He said, “Do you know any?”

I said, “of course, I know a lot of quotes.” Well, I don't know a lot of quotes from Lenin, but I said, “okay, how about this one, 'you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs.'” It was the first thing that came to mind.

He looked at me, he said, “that's good, I like that.” And he used it. You should have seen the reaction, talk about shuffling of feet, and so forth. He was talking about democracy; he was talking about how he was an immigrant's son, nothing about acting or films—as I had suggested. You know, he's just written his book, The Ragman's Son, so it's the same kind of stuff. Boy, I'm telling you, there was a lot of dismay at that event.

And you know what's so amusing, I picked up this book that he's written about his life and he has three or four lines about his visit to Hungary, in which he says, They invited me to their May First celebration—this was in April—they invited me to their May First thing but I knew my friends in Hollywood would never understand that so I couldn't wait to get out of the country fast enough.

Lies! My God. This guy just reveled being there, he ate it up. He used to stand on streetcorners, you know, hoping people would recognize him.

Q: Naturally.

ALEXANDER: He met Kadar. Why didn't he say he met Kadar? He could have done that.

Q: These are occasional things.

ALEXANDER: These are occasional things that happened, right. But on press and cultural things—.

Q: Educational exchanges.

ALEXANDER: No, there were no exchanges. The only thing going, Tom, was the Ford Foundation program which was on at the time. And that was one where of course the Hungarians picked their 40 or so candidates every year. There was no library but slowly I began getting—I hired a librarian and I began putting this library in shape.

Q: This was also a period when the Voice of America was not jammed, wasn't it? During that period of time?

ALEXANDER: Let me see.

Q: When they stopped jamming—.

ALEXANDER: Yes, they had stopped jamming, that's right.

Alexander Manages to Open USIS Library and Show Films There

Q: August 21, 1968 when they started again.

ALEXANDER: That's right. Then they started again. That's right. I know because when I was asked to—when they would have a program review, they would always send for the PAOs comments and so forth, and I could hear it quite clearly. But anyway, finally I opened the library. I didn't do anything. I remember there was seven people and I made a little speech. Probably the most inauspicious speech or opening ever.

Q: Especially with the Secret Policemen standing outside.

ALEXANDER: Exactly. Five of them waiting for the Cardinal to show up.

So at any rate, what I finally did one day was I decided to start films. So I went to the Foreign Ministry and I said, “you all know, it's no secret, I have this little library there and I want to show films.”

“What kind of films do you want to show?”

I said, “Space.”

“All right, send us a list every week of the films you're going to show.”

I said, “Okay.” I cleared it with Washington, I said, “Let's do this. Because they haven't closed the library, they haven't stopped anybody from coming in although we've got maybe one or two people a day.” I said, “Let me try the films and see what happens.”

And after the third week, Tom, I stopped sending a list of what I was going to show. And nobody ever bothered me and as far as I was concerned, this was a tacit acceptance by the Hungarian government that the American Embassy has a library and they're showing films. And that library is thriving today and it's great. I think it's, as Phil Arnold, who was then policy officer, I think, back here, he said that's a lasting achievement, that's something that remains. And it is, it's something to be proud of.

These film showings in the library reached their height in 1968 when, on the fifth anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination, I let the word out that we would be showing “Years of Lightning-Day of Drums.” I had to show the film over and over again as close to a thousand people jammed the Embassy, people who had never dared enter before. Marvin Kalb in town for CBS said it was an astonishing experience in his coverage.

Q: Now just for historical accuracy, you were in Budapest from—

ALEXANDER: '65 to '69.

Q: '69. And then you came back to Washington and served as the Deputy Area Director for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in USIA.

After A Washington Tour, Assignment As PAO, East Berlin: 1976-1979

ALEXANDER: Right. In the reign of Frank Shakespeare.

Q: Right. Now one other period of your service, your foreign service, which I think is particularly pertinent for this oral history project, is your service in East Berlin.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: As PAO in East Berlin. Let's talk about that for a little bit.

ALEXANDER: All right.

Q: When was that?

ALEXANDER: That was from 1976 to '79. John Sherman Cooper was the first Ambassador and I overlapped for a month with John Sherman Cooper and then he left.

Q: And then?

ALEXANDER: And then we had a 10-month hiatus with the DCM being Charg#.

Q: Sol Polansky.

ALEXANDER: Sol Polansky that was, that's right. And then David Bolen was nominated by the White House and came to East Berlin.

Q: This was really 10 years after your service in Hungary.

ALEXANDER: That's correct.

Contrasts Between Hungary and East Berlin Service

Q: Tell me about the similarities and differences, from the point of view of conducting public diplomacy.

ALEXANDER: Right. There was a vast difference. First of all, the embassy was like a fortress. We felt we were under—

Q: Which one?

ALEXANDER: In East Berlin. We felt we were under siege. Tom, you know the Germans very well. And I don't know how well you know the Hungarians. But the Hungarians are easy-going, relaxed, gentle, nice people. There's dangers there also, but nevertheless, they're a very casual, nice people to deal with and they sort of wink and they sort of will turn aside and not object too strenuously to anything. It's not that I didn't have problems there. I was tailed by the Secret Police. But we would joke with each other, the Hungarian Secret Police and I, in the streets.

In East Berlin, it was a horse of a different color. It was as different as the Hungarians are from the Germans. And not only just Germans, but East Germans, German Communists. Because in the beginning of course I could only deal with official Germans who were all party members and proud of it, and had the Parteiabzeichen always in their lapels.

Q: Parteiabzeichen is going to have to be spelled out.

ALEXANDER: Oh, of course, party badges.

At any rate, I'll never forget one day when I was at the Foreign Ministry and I was visiting with this official whose job was to deal with me, and I asked permission to go to the

university to meet the Dean of the university and to present him with a thousand books that the Agency had sent me for their library.

And he said, “I'm sorry but that's just not possible.”

I said, “why isn't it possible?”

He said, “well, the university is off limits, you just can't go there. You'll deal with me,” he said, “and send the books here and I'll see what I can do with them.”

I said, “the books were not meant for the Foreign Ministry, they were meant for the university.”

So this went back and forth. I finally said—I've forgotten his name now—I said, “Herr—whatever his name was—, you know, I spent four years in Hungary and I never had this kind of difficulty in Hungary.”

And he said—I'll first say it in German. He said, “Alexander, Du bist ein kluger Hade.”

Q: “You're a real wise one.”

ALEXANDER: Wise one, yeah. He says, “We know you and we know what you did in Hungary. And I just want to tell you one thing. The German Democratic Republic is not Hungary.” And that was, that's what set the standard. This was very early, very early in my time there. But it slowly did melt, little by little.

You know, Tom, you know Bulgaria well and you know that Bulgaria was always called, frequently called, maybe still is called the most Stalinist country in East Europe, but East Germany has been called the same thing, the most Stalinist. So I don't know, it's a tie. My guess would be from what I could see, Bulgaria was really under the thumb of the Russians, partly the ethnic ties there and so forth; the East Germans didn't have to be the way they were but they were. A German Communist is the worst kind of Communist; he

goes way the hell over. And these guys just unbelievable the difficulties they presented. However, with a lot of pleading and a lot of understanding and so forth, I was able to get some good things done.

Getting Permission for East Germans to Put on Dresden Art Exhibit in Washington Won Opportunity for Alexander to Put On Several USIS Shows in East Germany

The first thing was that they were very, very anxious to make a good impression in the United States. So we began negotiating for the Dresden art exhibit. And it was so—it would coincide with the opening of the East Wing of the National Gallery. They wanted that so badly that they conceded certain things to me. So I was able to put on a number of things—a tour by a string quartet to five cities; a film festival at which in Leipzig there were a thousand people in this auditorium and I wrote a speech for Ambassador Bolen who stood up and delivered this speech. And he never forgot it because that's the most East Germans that any ambassador had addressed in East Germany. And a number of other things that happened in the meantime, cultural programming, a photo exhibit, a theater seminar.

This seminar was something I am most proud of because I conceived it, promoted it with the East Germans and then had to go to New York—on the advice of USIA—and arrange it personally. The star figure was the late Lee Strasberg, the great Actors Studio director and advocate of the Stanislavsky method. Strasberg came with some reluctance but soon was virtually irrepressible in his desire to travel and lecture throughout East Germany, which we did. The East German theatre community ate it up, while the official circles frowned but let it happen.

So it was possible to do things, but everything very strict. And tailed all the time. And an atmosphere, sort of an oppressive atmosphere. But, in personal relations, I was able really to expand. I tried, I really tried, and they saw that I was not really up to any hanky-panky

and so forth and so on. And I, of course the people that I cultivated the most, outside of the musicians, were the writers.

Q: And you did establish a relationship with Stefen Heym?

ALEXANDER: Yes, with Stefen Heym. Stefen Heym and I became very close and he became a very good—I hate to say source of information because I didn't just drain him of what was going on under the surface, but I had a very good relationship with Stefen Heym, whom I had known before—he was one of the early people in psychological warfare when I was in the war, that's where I knew him from.

Q: You know that he had the next bunk to mine when I was at Camp Ritchie. He of course did not know that and hadn't remembered it, but I appeared on a television program with him in Berlin in the spring of 1985. Unbeknownst to me beforehand, he was one of the members of the roundtable. And as we were sort of preparing for this roundtable discussion beforehand, I said, you know, we have met before. He said, where? And I said, well, you had the next bunk to mine at Camp Ritchie, Maryland in early 1944. And he of course didn't remember that at all. And then of course he made a point on the program—he said, of course I met Mr. Tuch when we were both in the American intelligence school at Camp Ritchie, Maryland, sort of trying to identify me.

Establishment of USIS Library in East Berlin: Subsequent Harassment

ALEXANDER: One of the things that I was also able to do was open a library in the embassy.

Q: Right.

ALEXANDER: And also have the outside, the display panels, the USIA panels, outside. And at the opening of the library—

Q: Showcases.

ALEXANDER: Showcases, right. At the opening of the library, the Ambassador hadn't come, he was still with the Charg#, I invited the major writers of East Germany to come, most of whom were dissidents, and some of whom have defected since. And they all came. That was a nice thing. I was really happy because here I had opened the library in Hungary and now I had opened one in East Berlin. However, then we had problems because I put a sign outside saying simply that the library was open such and such a time. And boy, did this create a furor. The Foreign Ministry called in the Ambassador, said this is outrageous, get rid of that. The Ambassador in his vast inexperience with East Europe—

Q: The new Ambassador.

ALEXANDER: The new, Ambassador Bolen, called me in and said, “why did you put that sign up?”

I said, “well, Mr. Ambassador, how was anybody going to know when the library is open?”

He said, “I want that sign out.”

I said, “Why?”

He said, “I've just been called and they told me to take it out.”

I said, “Mr. Ambassador, do you want the United States to toady to the East German government? They call you in and say take this out and you're going to take it out?” I said, “We can't do that. Won't you give me 10 days, two weeks anyway. But if you're going to force me to do it, I'll have to do it. You're the Ambassador.”

Well after 10 days he forgot about it, until several months later he was called in again. And this time I was being inspected and the inspectors—

Q: You had an inspection?

ALEXANDER: I had an inspection team which came in. And this happened during the inspection, the second time the Ambassador was called in by the Foreign Ministry. He called me to his office and said, “I told you to take that sign out.”

I said, “You told me once but you didn't tell me that again. And so I just left it in.” I said, “So now they're angry about it again?”

He said, “I want it out by close of business today.”

So I went down, I said to the Inspectors, are you guys going to support me?

Q: You mean you went down to the inspectors?

ALEXANDER: To the inspectors who were in my office, that's right. I said, are you guys going to support me? Three inspectors. I said, please, you know, there's much more here at stake than just a little sign. This concerns the integrity of USIA, of the United States government. So they said, let's go up and talk to him. They came down and they said, he wants it out, it's got to go out. So it went out.

Since then, I was happy to learn, there's now a bronze plaque outside. As the Ambassadors change, other things change, you know, there's a bronze plaque permanently on the wall which now tells everybody the library hours. But you see, there was that kind of pressure also.

Admiration for John Sherman Cooper as Ambassador

Q: What was your relationship with John Sherman Cooper, your first Ambassador there?

ALEXANDER: John Sherman Cooper—if Martin Hillenbrand was a gentleman, John Sherman Cooper was the king of gentlemen. He was the gentlest, kindest ambassador

I can possibly imagine, a man, incidentally, deeply respected by the East Germans, and especially by Honecker. Once at the Leipzig fair, Sol Polansky and I drove down, and Honecker came and chatted with us. We shook hands at the American exhibit and he said, “how is Mr. Cooper?” We told him how Mr. Cooper—now in Washington—was and so forth. He said, “Send him my regards.” That's how well they remembered him.

John Sherman Cooper became slightly ill and was hospitalized and then finally after a month left. He was a man, I remember, who could not mention the United States or our country in any conversation without choking up. He was a man of such deep patriotism, absolutely astonishing. I've never seen anything like it, really.

Q: His wife, I understand, was a little more difficult.

ALEXANDER: His wife was difficult, yes. She was. A very stylish woman, but a difficult person. And you wonder sometimes about things like that. You know, Tom, we both experienced many ambassadors and many wives of ambassadors, and you know that there are some who are fine and some who are difficult.

Q: Your predecessor, Pic Littell, I think had a number of problems with her, whereas he had a very good relationship with the Ambassador.

ALEXANDER: He did indeed, he did indeed.

Q: Were there any exchanges going on between the United States and East Germany? Did you have a publication? Did you have the wireless file; could you distribute the wireless file?

ALEXANDER: Yes, we had a wireless file and I would distribute, did distribute the wireless file to a select group of people in the government. And that's as far as I could get. In Hungary, towards the end of my time there, I was distributing a wireless file, daily press

bulletin, to such an extent that one day I got a call from a Deputy Foreign Minister who said to me, I didn't receive my file this morning.

Q: In English this was.

ALEXANDER: Yes, the file was in English. No, it wasn't translated.

Q: Now, in East Berlin, if I remember correctly, you got a German translation from the West Berlin mission.

ALEXANDER: We sent—that must have come later on, Tom, but it was not in my time, no, not in my time.

At any rate, there were—that was distributed. You asked me one other thing.

Accomplishing Arrangements for Exchanges

Q: Exchanges.

ALEXANDER: Exchanges, right. I got a call from—I got a cable from IREX when they said, we would like to begin exchanges—

Q: IREX—.

ALEXANDER: IREX being, okay, International Research and Exchanges Board, headed by Allan Cassoff.

Q: The American non-governmental organization which coordinated the exchange programs with the communist countries of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and worked closely with USIA on these exchanges.

ALEXANDER: Precisely. The Public Affairs Officer in every one of these countries had to be deeply involved because he was the point man, really. So they came, they came

to West Berlin. I went over and drove them through the wall and we sat down to begin our negotiation. And the IREX program began then and it's fine, it's continuing still. And we began, the first real exchange of professors, which took place between Rostock University and Brown University; we had an exchange of German professors. And that thing developed. And it's going very strong now.

Q: It's mostly on the faculty exchanges.

ALEXANDER: Yes.

Q: Is it also graduate students?

ALEXANDER: I don't about now, Tom, but it wasn't when I was there. I don't know about now.

Q: Did you have any performing arts?

ALEXANDER: Yes, I had a string quartet.

Q: Oh, yes, you said that.

ALEXANDER: I had the Composers string quartet. And for the weeklong film festival in three cities I couldn't get any movie stars to come. They wanted that very much but I just couldn't arrange it. But there were about five different cultural programs all-told. And we also had a large choral group which toured the country.

Q: How was your relationship with the Agency at that time? With USIA? With your Area Director? Was it a good working relationship?

ALEXANDER: Yes, it was. It was Jodie Lewinsohn actually and Phil Arnold was deputy. They visited me and they were very pleased. Jodie of course was more West Europe

oriented, Phil was more East Europe oriented, having worked with us and having served in East Europe also, and Phil was especially keen on noticing who my contacts were.

Alexander Scores an Unexpected Contact with Head of East German Agitation and PropagandaDepartment of Central Communist Committee

I remember a congratulatory telegram he sent me one day because I was at a reception at the Soviet Embassy and my West German colleague came over to me and he said, “there's a gentleman here who wants very much to meet you and I told him that you'd be happy to meet him. I hope I was right.” I asked, who is he? He said, “he's a member of the Central Committee.” I said, Good Heavens.

So I went over. Well, he turned out to be head of the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee, and an extremely nice man by the name of Cobert. Hans Joachim Cobert. And we had a very nice conversation. And this man looked at me and said—and this is the first time in all my experience in the Agency, especially in East Europe that I heard an official of a hostile nation say to me, you are the Public Affairs Officer, we know you as the PAO. Can you imagine? I mean, a member of the Central Committee saying, you're the PAO? So I said, Herr Cobert, you and I have to really get to know each other better. He said, fine, you realize why I can't invite you to Central Committee headquarters, but perhaps we could have lunch someplace.

So I waited a few weeks and then I called him at Central Committee headquarters and I said, Herr Cobert, surely you can bend the rules a little and I can come over. He said, all right, why don't you come. Maybe we can eat in the canteen.

So I went, there I was in this austere room with a picture of Karl Marx and Honecker. And we had a two-hour conversation. It was one of the best conversations I've ever had. A marvelously interesting person who up until very recently was still sending me books

after I got here. And Phil Arnold sent me this telegram and said, he said, you have really penetrated there, congratulations.

The Value of Knowing the Host Country Language

Q: You could have never done that unless you had fluent German.

ALEXANDER: Yes, yes, that's true.

Q: It is important for us and our officers to be really fluent in the language. This is a leading question, obviously, but if you have any comments.

ALEXANDER: Oh, absolutely, I do. There is no question in the world that no matter how widespread English is throughout East Europe, that every official wants to deal with you in his native language. We all know how fluent Gromyko was in English and yet he always spoke only in Russian, and it was only in the most private conversations that he spoke English. He never wanted to be misunderstood. It's the same with all these people. My German goes all the way back to high school and college and then during psychological warfare and I was in Germany all those years, and then in West Berlin and then in East Berlin, so my German obviously was quite good. It was never bilingual because only native-born Germans are truly bilingual, but it was S-4.

And I'll never forget, Tom, however, and this is just a footnote to a story. You know that a lot of these people must know some English. And yet they insist on speaking to you in their native language. I was once at the Academy of Sciences in East Germany and in one of the intermissions between speeches. I saw a member of the Politburo, Kurt Hager, a man that I would never in my normal routine work have occasion to meet. He was talking with someone and then when he was finished he was sort of looking around. I went up to him and I introduced myself. He smiled and he said, oh, how are you, nice to meet you, and so forth. And we started talking in German and I said to him, I said, I know that you are in charge of cultural matters here in Germany and that nothing can transpire without

your personal approval. I want to express the thanks of my Embassy and my government for your allowing a writer who was going to go to Iowa for the Iowa writers program, for allowing him to go. I said, you know, it's a very fine program, I said, it has nothing to do with the other problems that your country and my country have, so I want to thank you. And I also want to—and I stopped. I couldn't think of the German word for something or other.

And suddenly this man with whom I'm talking German, says to me, in Oxford English, he says, Mr. Alexander, what is the word you are groping for. And I said, you speak English? And he says, why shouldn't I? I spent the entire war in England. So there is that situation, too. However, that does not mean that language is not important. Language is terribly important. Besides, how can you read the newspapers? How can you go to the theater? How can you listen to the radio? How can you watch television? How can you understand an entire society? Absolutely essential, absolutely vital. And I don't know if we have slipped. I have read things recently that since the days of, you remember the Usher Burdick book The Ugly American when suddenly we had a resurgence of interest in languages and you couldn't go anyplace unless you went to FSI, and everybody needed at least one foreign language. I don't think we're as intent now as we used to be.

Q: I'm afraid not.

ALEXANDER: And it's wrong, it's wrong.

Q: Is there anything else that you would like to add in regard to your tour in Germany, East Germany?

ALEXANDER: I'd like to make one point. I feel that no matter how hostile relations can be, and I have seen that hostility between Hungary and the United States when we had demonstrations and breaking doors and glass windows down, burning the President in effigy, and the intense hostility in East Germany, that no matter how hostile those things can be, the role of the chief USIA officer in that Embassy is a very, very important role

because through cultural affairs—not necessarily through press relations, because that's always very difficult, all the newspapers are controlled by the party, but through cultural relations, you don't necessarily tear down the barriers, but you create a climate which makes it more amenable for officials to talk and negotiate with each other, especially when there are cultural guests in the country. And you don't get nasty with each other at cultural events. You talk about the community and even identity of interests.

And in that respect I think USIA, especially in East Europe, plays a leading role. USIA, as one ambassador said to me at the end of my tour in his little speech, he said your programs were the cutting edge of U.S. policy in our country. And those are words that I'm always pleased to recall.

Q: On that note, thank you very much, Ed, for this interview.

End of interview